

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

Volume XVIII, Number 24

Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of December 2, 1957

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD-TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Look Homeward, Angel"



New York World-Telegram

The Sun

November 29, 1957

Wolfe Novel Now Fine Play

By FRANK ASTON.

There are thick layers of the drama that makes up daily life in Ketti Frings' "Look Homeward, Angel," at the Ethel Barrymore. This three-act adaptation of the

Wolfe novel offers conflict and reality under the guise of nostalgia, tenderness, violence, hatred, humor and a stretch of deathbed sentiment which borders on sentimentality.

From the first moment, there is sensed a pervasive harshness, and this mounts progressively into a cruelty that may leave an onlooker feeling partly de-

stroyed. In fact, the way to enjoy this show is to let it knock you out. And that's easy, because you care about these people, you laugh with them, you worry and grieve among them.

The Wolfe tale concerns a North Carolina family dominated by a money-grabbing mother, who drives her husband to drink, one son to a premature death and another son (the author) away from her to "be unbeaten and beloved." This second son dreams of far places; the

sound of a locomotive conjures for him the sight of rails stretching endlessly; and he wonders if he will have time to visit all the lands he has read about.

Buying Happiness.

Those at home do not understand him, least of all his possessive mother, who would solve all problems with money. She makes it from her boarding house, she will make more in real estate, with money she will send the lad to college and buy him happiness.

When, under her husband's tongue lashing, she realizes the depth of her failures, the two of them in a brief frenzy, try to demolish the symbolical boarding house with their hands. It's an ugly moment, but strangely comical.

Vivid Performances.

The performances of Jo Van Fleet, as the mother, and Anthony Perkins, as the adolescent, should live long in theater memory. Hugh Griffith wrenches humor and bitterness from the role of the gravestone-cutting husband who clings to a marble angel. Arthur Hill, as the consumptive son, and Frances Hyland, as the roomer who teaches the young lad about sex, contribute superior work.

The numerous and competent cast moves under George Roy Hill's vivid direction through one of those cutout,

"LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL"

Play in three acts and five scenes by Ketti Frings, based on the novel by Thomas Wolfe; staged by George Roy Hill; settings and lighting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Motley; presented by Kermit Bloomgarden and Theatre 200, Inc., at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, November 28, 1957. The cast:

Ben Gant..... Arthur Hill
Mrs. Marie "Fatty" Pert.....
Florence Sundstrom
Helen Gant Barton.....
Rosemary Murphy
Hugh Barton..... Leonard Stone
Eliza Gant..... Jo Van Fleet
Will Pentland.....
Tom Flatley Reynolds
Eugene Gant..... Anthony Perkins
Jake Clatt..... Joseph Bernard
Mrs. Clatt..... Mary Farrell
Florry Mangle.....
Elizabeth Lawrence
Mrs. Snowden..... Julia Johnston
Mr. Farrell..... Dwight Marfield
Miss Brown..... Susan Torrey
Laura James..... Frances Hyland
W. O. Gant..... Hugh Griffith
Dr. McGuire..... Victor Kilian
Tarkinton..... Jack Sheehan
Madame Elizabeth.....
Bibi Osterwald
Luke Gant..... Arthur Storch

revolving sets which Jo Mielziner constructs so expertly.

The Motley costumes of about 1914, not to mention songs like "Sweet Genevieve" on the family Victrola, should bring a long sigh from the oldsters.

DAILY NEWS

November 29, 1957

'Look Homeward, Angel' a Play Of Splendid and Stirring Beauty

By JOHN CHAPMAN

From Thomas Wolfe's novel, "Look Homeward, Angel," Ketti Frings has made a magnificent play. Last evening, under the producing sponsorship of Kermit Bloomgarden

and the direction of George Roy Hill, the play was given an almost miraculously beautiful performance at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Here is a drama which ranks with, perhaps above, Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" in strength and compassion, and its actors have been inspired to the kind of playing which transcends the workaday stage and vaults into the realm of spirit.

The story is not a simple one, for it involves the hopes and de-

feats of many people; but, Miss Frings guides it so truly, so expertly, that it becomes one simple, big emotional adventure. This is not merely an adaptation of a book, however profound the book may be; it is a work of splendid artistic creation on the part of Miss Frings.

The setting of the play is a North Carolina town and the time is 1916. The dominant character is a woman, mother of sev-

eral children, who runs a boarding house and a husband with an iron will—a woman to whom money is the one great goal. Opposed to her, but not fighting her, is her youngest son, 17, who yearns for all the spacious beauty there is in the world. At the very end a ghostly voice tells this lad that the world does not lie outside this boarding house, outside this town, in the college he yearns for at Chapel Hill. The world, this voice tells him, is in none of these places or any other; all of it is within himself. Look inward, boy.

This play must be seen, not read about. Its events are many and varied, ranging from wild humor to selfless love and deep

grief, and there should be no attempt to detail any of them here. Suffice it to say that they all come together through some magical alchemy into a work of great beauty.

The performance of Jo Van Fleet as the mother is only one of the splendors of the acting. There is another one by Anthony Perkins as her youngest son which is a masterly portrait of yearning youth. There is a pictorially splendid and robustly humorous portrait of a shrew-ridden, hard-drinking husband and father—a cutter of gravestones by trade and an artist in his heart—by Hugh Griffith.

And so the list goes. Arthur Hill as an elder brother whom life is passing by. Frances Hyland, who has one lovely scene as a tremulous young boarder who has fallen in love with the boy. Florence Sundstrom as a comfortable-type boarder. Bibi Osterwald as the town's madam—a warm-hearted soul come to buy a monument for one of her girls. Victor Kilian as a straightforward town doctor. These and many more have been caught up in the theatrical magic of "Look Homeward, Angel."

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

November 29, 1957

—FIRST NIGHT REPORT— WALTER KERR'S REVIEW 'Look Homeward, Angel'

FOR one insane moment toward the end of "Look Homeward, Angel," the father, mother, sons and daughters of the passionate, embattled, hopelessly bound Gant family turn with unholy wrath on the home that has held them together. They clutch at the doorposts and wrench them from their sockets. Splinters of benches and chairs fly furiously into the North Carolina sunset. An ax rides high in the air and threatens to descend on any foolish skull that tries to halt the wholesale destruction. For this one second, and for this one second only, the Gants would like to wipe out their world.

For their world, as the late Thomas Wolfe lived it and wrote about it, was eternally two-faced. To a restless young writer doomed to simultaneous love and fury, it offered affection and solitary confinement in the same chilling breath. Here, on a gnarled and creaking

Victorian porch, a man's heart could be warmed; it could also, in the same instant, be drained of every ounce of its blood.

What makes the Ketti Frings adaptation of Mr. Wolfe's autobiographical novel so fascinating in the theater is the perfect, perfectly sustained, tension with which it holds these violently opposed emotions in balance.

Here are Anthony Perkins, the calflike but bitterly courageous youngest Gant, and Jo Van Fleet, the property-eating mother of a resentful brood, trying to break the bonds that are strangling both of them. The savagery of Mr. Perkins' onslaught when he throws back his boyish shoulders, lets an irrepressible shudder shake him from head to foot, and screams out his "What more do you want of me, mother?" is brilliant, spine-tingling defiance.

But we are not allowed to take obvious, melodramatic satisfaction from the turnabout.

For Miss Van Fleet has spent an evening showing us a worn, often venomous face in varying lights; in merciless glare and in disturbing shadow. She has made it clear that this slavey of a mother works as hard as she does in order to win the pity of her imprisoned brood; she has made it just as clear that the woman's voice can break in mid-sentence, and her step falter in the darkened garden, at every overheard syllable that tell her she is not really loved.

And the wrench that is felt, as these two turn their backs to one another and try to pull apart forever, is as touching as it is terrifying. Mr. Perkins and Miss Van Fleet are superb; the writing has given them shattering contrasts to make and challenging dimensions to fill.

But the elusive borderline between fiercely contending truths is, under George Roy Hill's unerring direction, precisely trod by an entire company through five mercurial scenes. Hugh Griffith, as the "wild Bacchus" of a stone-cutter who is Eugene Gant's father, builds a magnificent dream of the Cynthia who was his first wife, only to shatter it wantonly in a burst of candid laughter, with a gargantuan humor that is side-splitting and sobering in the same intuitive stroke.

Bibi Osterwald, as the proprietress of the town's best

bawdy-house, comes to order a gravestone for one of her most promising proteges ("cut off in her bloom") and leaves with a crocodile tear that is mysteriously, wonderfully touching. Arthur Hill's invalid Ben, conversing in the moonlight with his long-dead twin and weaving through life with "a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other," is beautifully drawn. Frances Hyland, as the "older woman" who is Eugene's first love, returns a passionate embrace, and then packs to leave, with simple, quietly illuminating, honesty. Rosemary Murphy, Florence Sundstrom, and half a dozen others swiftly and deftly outline a nerve-wracked community against Jo Mielziner's drowsy, glowingly atmospheric setting.

You will hear, now and then, echoes of the effortful rhetoric that have disturbed even Thomas Wolfe's most ardent admirers. A few of the cliché-ridden catalogues creep in, though they are muted; there is pretentiousness here and there when one or another Gant stops wrangling long enough to venture on philosophy.

But the essential, genuinely exciting theatricality of Miss Frings' play swallows these small burdens whole. "Look Homeward, Angel" looks at several sides of all the heart-sick struggles it embraces. And it makes them live, very warmly, again.

Daily Mirror

November 29, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Look Homeward' Is Superb Drama

When it comes to gripping drama, Kermit Bloomgarden is the man to provide it. Remember "Death of a Salesman"? He produced it. Currently he is sponsoring another smash hit in "Look Homeward, Angel" at the Ethel Barrymore. It looms as a hard-to-come-by ticket.

This is an excellent dramatization of Thomas Wolfe's novel of

the same title. Legend has it that the late Maxwell Perkins condensed thousands of pages, into the tome which finally made the bookstalls, and Ketti Frings has done a remarkable job in cutting the lengthy script into a play that has a reasonable running time.

"LOOK HOMEWARD, Angel" is a gem play, but it has moments that are truly moving. And it has several virtuoso roles for

players who know what to do with them, under George Roy Hill's discerning direction. Everything connected with it is off the top shelf.

Jo Van Fleet is magnificent as a selfish, calculating mother who would use her husband and children as stepping stones toward what she considers security. In the end, she comes out the loser, but Miss Van Fleet's portrayal is a winner. Here is tense and commanding acting, acting that lends lustre to this season.

Hugh Griffith, as the husband who cuts monuments for the citizens of Altamont, N.C. and only comes home to his wife's rooming house when he's on the verge of DT's, also etches an unforgettable portrait. Anthony Perkins, as the realistic mother's idealistic son, contributes a performance that should garner awards for merit when the drama clubs get around to casting their annual ballots.

Arthur Hill, Frances Hyland, Victor Killan, Florence Sundstrom, Bibi Osterwald and Arthur Storch offer characterizations that are memorable. They are beautifully detailed and as real

as life itself. You won't find miming superior to that on display at the Ethel Barrymore over many a semester.

Bloomgarden and Theater 200, Inc., have spent a lot of money to give us the best of everything. Jo Mielziner has designed a setting that is a nostalgically accurate replica of a shoddy, small-town boarding-house, and Motley has come up with costumes that catch the flavor of 1916.

THERE ARE MANY critics who tab Thomas Wolfe a genius. Ironically, he loved the theatre and tried to write for it, without much success. Now, Miss Frings has turned his autobiographical novel into superb theatre. It's too bad the master didn't live to see it, for we think it would have delighted his sensitive soul.

"Look Homeward, Angel," is not for those seeking escapist entertainment. Rather is it a rewarding evening for those with the courage to face some of the ugly—and wonderful—facts of life. You'll get as much from it as you bring it. And we got a lot.

"Look Homeward, Angel"—continued

New York Post

November 29, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD
WATTS Jr.

A Moving and Beautiful New Drama

A rich, beautiful, moving and full-bodied play has been made from Thomas Wolfe's distinguished autobiographical novel, "Look Homeward, Angel." Ketti Frings' glowing dramatization, which opened last night at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, is also perfectly cast, stunningly acted, sensitively directed and admirably set. What the season has been sorely needing was a new American drama of quality and importance, and "Look Homeward, Angel" is exactly that. It just goes to show how stirring the theater can be when all its elements are functioning imaginatively.

With notable fidelity to the letter and spirit of the Wolfe novel, yet without sacrificing its status as a creative dramatic

achievement, Miss Frings' play tells of the coming of age of the shambling, shy, morose young man called Eugene Gant, with his aspirations toward being a writer. As an account of the growing pains of a youthful author, it is remarkably real, touching and perceptive, but it is much more than a striking fragment of dramatized autobiog-

raphy. It is likewise a deeply perceptive account of the family background from which genius sprang.

As a portrait gallery of wonderful richness and variety, done with a sympathy and understanding that can be completely merciless in its candor, the play has all the fullness and breadth of a fine novel without losing the emotional intensity and impact of the drama at its best. Perhaps there are moments when the author's natural determination to get as much of the book's original material as possible into the dramatization threatens to make things sprawling, but always the skill of the writing and acting keeps the work safely intact.

While Eugene Gant is the focal figure of the drama, the dominating characters of the grasping, narrow-minded mother and the tormented, embittered father loom with the stature of giants. There is also the moving characterization of the dying, compassionate older brother, but even the lesser people of the narrative, including the girl visitor who loves Eugene, the hard-working sister, the understanding village doctor, the sailor brother and the town madam, are illuminatingly depicted. All of them are truly living, breathing creations.

The Acting

And how beautifully all of them are acted! There isn't a characterization, however large or small, that shows a sign of weakness. Indeed, it is difficult to know where to begin the applause. Anthony Perkins is not only tremendously moving as Eugene, but makes you believe that this gawky boy has the stuff of writing genius in him. Yet who could say that his performance is any finer than Arthur Hill's infinitely understanding and touching portrayal of the doomed older brother? Jo Van Fleet is sympathetic yet merciless as the mother, and Hugh Griffith's portrait of the father is a masterpiece of robust, tortured power.

Then there is Frances Hyland in an appealing interpretation of the girl who loves and sadly leaves Eugene, while, to name just a few, Florence Sundstrom as the kind-hearted sweetheart of the brother, Victor Kilian as the doctor, Rosemary Murphy as the sister, Bibi Osterwald as the dignified madam, and Arthur Storch as the sailor brother couldn't, I believe, be improved upon. The direction of George Roy Hill and the sets of Jo Mielziner are brilliant. "Look Homeward, Angel" is a dramatic event.

Journal American

November 29, 1957

Wolfe Novel Made Into Huge Success

By JOHN McCLAIN

"LOOK Homeward, Angel," the Ketti Frings play based on the Thomas Wolfe novel, is, quite simply, one of the best evenings I've ever had in the theatre. As presented at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre last night it should remain a milestone in our time.

Miss Frings should receive the loudest praise, for she has most ingeniously telescoped a few chapters from the long autobiographical novel into an overpowering consideration of a young man's escape from adolescence.

Her characters have true depth and dimension, her situations are simple and valid. There is no message, no symbols; this is good writing reduced to its unaffected best.

Why it emerges thus is due to her painstaking and insistent evaluation of the people at her disposal. There aren't very many of them, actually,

but each one is meticulously etched. When the play reaches a dramatic climax, the emotional values stem from character — we know the people and we are enormously interested in them.

Searing Document

The segment of the novel here dramatized concerns the author's first skirmish with love, his disillusionment, and subsequent departure to face the world. The events, as such, are never monumental. Many young men have been similarly seduced; deaths occur in all

families with unexpected frequency; not all fathers and mothers are conventional parents.

But Miss Frings has moulded this material into a searing document. There are many unforgettable scenes: the father's roaringly drunken entrance, his poignant reunion with the town madam; the mother's bleak admission of the tragedy of her marriage; the brother's death (as fine a scene as ever staged) and, finally, the youth's parting renunciation of his mother.

Young Anthony Perkins, reclaimed from Hollywood, plays the lead and should win the season's awards in a walk. It is difficult to imagine a role better tailored for him, and he does it with brilliant ease and persuasion. His explosive tirade in the last act was re-

warded by cheers from the audience.

Stroke of Genius

As his mother, Jo Van Fleet is superb. The tolling matriarch, proprietress of a boarding house, she is at once demanding and domineering, yet curiously sympathetic.

A stroke of sheer genius is the selection of Hugh Griffith, a limey import, to portray the father. Suitably bearded, and with his wild eyes roaming in all directions, he gives a resounding impersonation of the beleaguered stone mason, progenitor of this disturbed brood.

Casting of the supporting parts is equally accurate. Arthur Hill is a sensitive and thoughtful older brother; Frances Hyland is a convincing seductress; and Victor Kilian, Florence Sundstrom, Bibi Osterwald and Arthur Storch are extremely effective.

George Roy Hill, a fugitive from Television, here establishes himself as a first class director for the theatre. Jo Mielziner has evolved sets which resourcefully suggests the premises of a North Carolina boarding house, the workshop of a tombstone artisan, and such.

Wow! This is a real big one. Get your orders in early.

The New York Times

November 29, 1957

The Theatre: "Look Homeward, Angel"

Luminous Adaptation of Wolfe Novel Opens

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WHAT Thomas Wolfe could never do, Ketti Frings has done admirably. She has mined a solid drama out of the craggy abundance of "Look Homeward, Angel," and it was played with great passion and tenderness at the Ethel Barrymore last evening.

Obviously, a vast quantity of Wolfe's turbulent autobiography had to be omitted. But it is not missed. For this story of a family of violent feelings and of a moonstruck youth dreaming of the world is complete in what it chronicles and in what it foreshadows for the years after the curtain descends.

Is this what really happened in Wolfe's youth? The question is pertinent because we are seeing it through the dark glass of a gigantic, moody writer who absorbed into his personal style every-

thing he touched. Following the nomenclature of the Wolfe novel, this is the story of a few weeks in the life of the Gants, boardinghouse keepers in Altamont, N. C., in 1916.

In Joe Mielziner's stage setting, the boardinghouse is an unlovely, shapeless building with feeble pretensions to comfort. And most of the boarders are insipid nonentities. But the Gants are explosive people held together by the graceless tenacity of the mother. There, is the father, a stonecutter, epic in all he does—in drunkenness, in dreams of glory, in suffering and rebelliousness.

There is Ben Gant, the older brother who longs for the world outside but whose health is frail. There is the irritable, complaining sister, who keeps the boardinghouse running. But principally there is Eugene Gant, the prototype of Thomas Wolfe, a gangling, shy, sensitive boy in the late teens who despises the boardinghouse, does a few chores unwillingly but daydreams

about all the things he has read about and regards the world outside Altamont as a rich treasury of fabulous sights, sounds and poetic sensations.

At the final curtain, Miss Frings manages to get him off to the university in Chapel Hill, where his real life will begin. Meanwhile, the loose and lazy life in the boardinghouse has been stirred by some tumultuous events and angry talk that shakes the universe. In a scene so bursting with grief that it can hardly be borne, Ben dies at the end of the second act. The third act completes Eugene's rhapsodic love affair with one of the boarders, who leaves him desolate and shaken with a note of farewell.

It all has gargantuan humor and vitality, because Miss Frings has done her work with understanding as well as skill. But it has the mark of truth also because the performance is magnificent. George Roy Hill, the director,

has organized it into a torrent of wild feelings.

All the actors are superb in many styles and tempos—Hugh Griffith as the titanic father whose hatreds and humors are equally blistering; Jo Van Fleet as the mother whose tyrannies and whose love for her children are forbidding and also pathetic; Frances Hyland as Eugene's romantic ideal; her dainty, tremulous acting is modestly enchanting; Arthur Hill as the restless older brother, full of a kind of rueful wonder and also of affection for Eugene.

In that part, Anthony Perkins gives a brave and poignant performance—soft, willowy, a little sullen, but shining with an eagerness about the world when something loosens his tongue and releases the dreams stored away in his youthful mind. For there is faith in this character—faith in the unseen, hope for glory.

Mr. Perkins' grave, quiet yet bubbling acting gives continuity and a future to this endearing character. And Miss Frings, being honest, gives it an intimation of doom just before the curtain falls. For we know that this lad who starts off so brightly is beginning a journey that will always be tormented. Thomas Wolfe wrote the story originally. Miss Frings has given it honor on the stage.

"The Country Wife"

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

November 28, 1957

—FIRST NIGHT REPORT—

WALTER KERR'S REVIEW

'The Country Wife'

JULIE HARRIS is not only the littlest kid on the block, she is also the toughest.

Give her a play that is twice as big and twice as long and about forty times as old as she is, and her fists double up. Give her a whole museum of gingerbread plotting and boudoir skulduggery and elaborate language that has lost some of its zip over the centuries, and her elbows fly out at an adamant angle.

Let's bowl the old bric-a-brac over, says Miss Harris, and away she goes. With her little

blonde curls bobbing on the back of her spirited neck, her low voice rumbling and growling and trilling her countryside 'r's, and her spunky knees doubled up for a leap into the nearest male lap—she can make the leap whether the man is standing or sitting—this second cousin to a mouse sets out to conquer the world of marceled wigs, elegant walking-sticks, and high-fashion witticisms that ripple musically even when their malice has faded.

Whatever is still triumphantly playable in William

Wycherly's three-hundred-year-old romp through the bedrooms of London, Miss Harris thumpingly plays. The letter-writing scene? (This innocent but avid "Country Wife" is commanded by her properly jealous husband to dash off a note dismissing the rakehell she would most like to be locked in with). The quill pen goes like crazy. Her tongue works furiously in her dishonest cheek. Her eyes roll gloriously in shifty deceit and sudden dreams of disgraceful glory. The letter-writing scene is very funny.

She wins other rounds: sucking a China orange with noisy delectation, rapturously reporting the number of times a scoundrel has kissed her improperly, jiggling her feet beneath her handsome Motley costume in amorous joy that simply cannot be contained.

And she has at least one wholly delightful ally in her struggle to best an alien style and an alien century. Pamela Brown has consented to grace the insufficient role of

"THE COUNTRY WIFE"

Play in three acts and ten scenes by William Wycherley; staged by George Devine; settings and costumes by Motley; music by Thomas Eastwood; presented by the Playwrights Company, Malcolm Wells and Daniel Blum at the Adelphi Theatre, November 27, 1957. The cast:

Mr. Horner... Laurence Harvey
Quack... George Tyne
Sir Jasper Fidget...

Ernest Thesiger
Lady Fidget... Pamela Brown
Mrs. Dainty Fidget... Ludi Claire
Mr. Harcourt... Richard Easton
Mr. Dorilant... Peter Donat
Mr. Sparkish... John Moffatt
Mr. Pinchwife...

Paul Whitsun-Jones
Mrs. Margery Pinchwife...

Julie Harris
Althea... Maureen Quinney
Mrs. Squeamish... Colleen Dewhurst
Lucy... Joan Hovis
Old Lady Squeamish...

Cynthia Latham
Parson... David Vaughan

"The Country Wife"—continued

Lady Fidget, and Lady Fidget never had it so good. The silken insult of Miss Brown's upturned face, arrogantly pursed lips, and enormous, disbelieving eyes is enough to turn any old epigram into liquid gold. (Some of the Wycherley jests have karats left in them, of course; you know it when the lady is lusciously lading them out). And even a casual "Fie, fie, sister, whither shall we ramble?" from this decorous demon who can't abide euphuics sounds like the very best butter.

Having acknowledged these

two saving graces—and graces they are—in the revival at the Adelphi, we are forced to turn to the balance of the company and the barnacles the play has acquired down the years.

The balance of the company is by no means incompetent. Laurence Harvey is cast as the notorious dandy who rumors himself impotent in order to allay the fears of the town's more cautious husbands (this seems to me one of the few genuinely original sex jokes to have been invented since

Aristophanes), and Maureen Quinney, Paul Whitsun-Jones, Richard Easton, and John Moffatt are on hand to exercise their voices uphill and downdale over the fancifully bawdy terrain.

Trouble is, they do sound like piano exercises. They cover the scale, all right, but there's no interior melody making sense of the sound. The inflections are lavish but the funny, waspish, candid, lusting minds that once produced them are missing. As a result, and except for the aforementioned big scenes, they land no slam-bang

laughs, only the gentlest of stray titters.

And the play, for all the durability of its impudent premise, isn't sturdy enough or independently rich enough to operate at this level. "The Country Wife," if it is to be done at all, needs to be brilliantly done at every sly and lecherous turn, with every conceivable facet glittering in a sapphire blaze. Occasional shooting-stars do go over at the Adelphi; but between flares the sky is uncomfortably bleak.

New York Post

November 29, 1957

Julie Harris Triumphs In 'The Country Wife'

There seemingly is no end to Julie Harris' gifts as an actress. We all know how brilliant she has been in serious roles ranging from a confused 12-year-old Southern child through the neurotic and footloose Sally Bowles to Anouilh's Joan of Arc. On Wednesday night, at the Adelphi Theater, she turned to the entirely new field of artificial Restoration clowning in Wycherley's classic comedy of three centuries ago, "The Country Wife," and she was wonderful. She was not only genuinely funny in the wildly hoydenish title part, but also completely darling.

As for "The Country Wife," I suppose there is no doubt that a proper appreciation of Restora-

tion comedy now demands a specialized taste in the playgoer. Those dramatists of good King Charles' golden days were certainly single-minded fellows. Their one subject was the gaiety of mass infidelity and their one joke was variations on the theme of cuckoldry, and, while it would require a little blindness to assert that we were morally su-

perior to any such licentious thoughts today, the truth is that the topic can grow dangerously monotonous.

But, although Wycherley lacked the superb literary graces of Congreve, he did know how to give his variations a fine flourish, and he had the ability to invent a good springboard for his antics in the idea of a rakish beau who spread the rumor of his own impotence to avert the suspicions of hitherto jealous husbands. And, while a lot of the romping is by now pretty tedious, there are scenes that remain freshly comic, such as the episode where the guileful innocent from the country fools her husband into believing a letter to her lover is a rejection.

Whatever reservations one may have about the contemporary joys of Restoration wit, there can be few about the style and beauty of the new production. The sets and costumes by Motley have rare loveliness, grace and gaiety and George Devine, who staged

the recent successful revival in London, has directed with appreciative skill and taste. It is true that the players are considerably handicapped by a theater much too large for so airy and fragile a comedy, but this doesn't keep them from acting with admirable deftness and relish.

Laurence Harvey has the proper dash and flourish for the role of the gentleman who spreads false rumors about himself, and Pamela Brown, who seems to the Restoration born, is an especial delight as Lady Fidget, who disapproves of euphuics. And there are excellent performances by, among others, Ernest Thesiger, Paul Whitsun-Jones, John Moffatt, Richard Easton, Maureen Quinney and Joan Hovis. But, with all respect to a talented company, this is Julie Harris' triumph. If only as the latest step in the growth of a remarkable talent, it would deserve attention.

RICHARD WATTS JR.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

November 29, 1957

'Country Wife' Ages Quite Gracefully

"The Country Wife" is bawdy all right. That's the way Wycherley wrote it in 1673 and that's how it's being interpreted at the Adelphi. As students recall, it is a lark among adulterers, discovering a galloping kind of humor and stating that married couples of social position find their choicest pleasures extra-curricularly.

Although the farce origi-

nated in Restoration England it sounds timely to readers of contemporary gossip. It's like the latest bulletin from cafe echelons, for instance, to hear the country wife attempting

to discard her husband for a more virile one because that's what all the city ladies do. And it doesn't seem dated when restless wives prowled bachelor apartments for reasons above and beyond the call of etchings. Wycherley said what our columnists allege, that we have always with us the female on the make—and let every man beware, lest he fall ecstatically a victim.

Playing Superb.

The playing is superb, as the troupe hurries, pauses, poses, simpers, bellows and chitter-chatters under George Devine's knowing direction. And for an added fillip, three wives, a little drunk and recently caressed, burst into an Eastwood song, as if they were teetering at a properly mahogany bar of 1957.

The staging is a brilliant lesson in how to be imaginative, flexible, fast and ample,

without employing more than about half a dozen props. It is a Motley production, rounded out with lovely costumes.

Miss Harris in Lead.

In the title role, Julie Harris brings on one shout of laughter after another, reaching a comedy peak when she takes down, then fakes, her bumbling husband's letter to her lover. As said lover, Laurence Harvey has great sport by pretending to husbands that he has been made impotent. Pamela Brown is just right as the wife who first bares the bachelor's deception. But they're all good, just fine.

This observer hesitates to make a blanket recommendation, much as he'd like to. If he did, the kids might take the old folks and feel sorry too late at the sight of their elderly blushes. FRANK ASTON.

The New York Times

November 28, 1957

The Theatre: 200-Year-Old Comedy

'The Country Wife' Is Staged at Adelphi

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SINCE Wycherley's "The Country Wife" turns up only once in twenty years, the production that opened last evening at the Adelphi deserves attention.

And not only because Wycherley wrote it nearly two centuries ago with complaisant contempt for the lewdness of his times. For the current production offers Julie Harris as the naively unprincipled bucolic, Laurence Harvey as the chief libertine, Pamela Brown as the most ostentatious of the doxies, particularly elegant settings designed by Motley and knowing direction by George Devine.

In fact, when you add up

all the merits of this occasion they are impressive. As the country wife enraptured by the sinful pleasures of London, Miss Harris is most amusing. She looks as attractive as a stick of holiday candy in the tidy costumes provided for her. She skips about the stage with lively relish of the escapades in which Wycherley ensnared her. In the famous letter-writing scene she is both innocent and funny. Her concentration on the knaveries of the moment provides the broadest comedy she has ever played. The scribbling, scrawling, "squirring" are uproarious.

In the lacquered staging of Mr. Devine, the other actors are in top form, too. Mr. Harvey's dry and elaborate Horner, whose lines are neatly barbed; Miss Brown's conde-

scending Lady Fidget, whose wickedness has an imposing style; Paul Whitsun-Jones' obese, rude, crotchety Mr. Pinchwife, always the tyrant, always the fool; John Moffatt's fatuous, supercilious Mr. Sparkish, who insistently outsmarts himself; Ernest Thesiger's doddering, sniggery Sir Jasper—are played with the artifice of seventeenth-century prints and the exuberance of modern showmanship. Not that there is anything lacking in the other performances.

Why, then, should a theatre-goer be a little reluctant about a production put on with so much artistic taste? Since producers at the moment cannot choose the theatres most suitable to their plays, it is ungracious to quibble over the size of the Adelphi. But it seems to this playgoer that the deep stage

and the big auditorium of the Adelphi account for the fact that the actors are constantly forcing the performance.

They have to shout and hurry. The seventeenth-century rillery at times broadens into a musical comedy romp. But the brittle style of "The Country Wife" cannot sustain so much volume.

It is a brilliant play. It wittily describes the licentiousness and lasciviousness of a society that had been recently released from the dour bonds of Puritanism and that took pride in its profligacy. No history can record the follies of the Charles II era as vividly as this lewd skirmish written by a scornful participant.

Although the wit is devastating, it has a small compass. It depends on turns of a phrase, flourishes of the wrist, bridling behind fans, ogling through a glass, petty snobberies and mannerisms of stage movement—glides, canters, trotting.

Pity that so accomplished a production should be consigned to so huge a house. The dimensions of the theatre blunt the style.

Journal of the American

November 29, 1957

Decrepit Romp But Julie Tries

By JOHN McCLAIN

JULIE HARRIS has a high and merry time in "The Country Wife," which opened at the Adelphi Theatre two nights ago. She giggles, cavorts, rolls her r's endlessly and flirts shamelessly with the audience in an effort to bring new life to this decrepit Restoration romp.

But I'm afraid I've "had" the play—Mr. Wycherley and his parade of lustful imbeciles can go plotz. This edition is skillfully mounted with diaphanous drops and elegant costumes by Motley; the casting is immaculate in the Hogarth tradition,

right down to the smallest blackamoor. But the belabored insistence on lewdness and lechery, in this year of the Sputnik, strikes me as a bloody bore.

Corny Character

There are, of course, redeeming moments. Miss Harris brings honest hilarity to the letter-writing scene; her frantic manipulation of the quill pen is a delight, her byplay between husband and audience, a frolic.

Pamela Brown, that saucy and superior performer, has relatively small scope in the role of Lady Fidget. But she impressed me as the single member of the cast who conveyed the wanton behavior of the period with conviction. When she rolls her lustrous lamps, brother! she means business.

It is difficult to assay the contribution of Laurence Harvey, as Mr. Horner, for it is a corny, one-joke characterization. This rake has convinced the husbands of London that he is not interested in ladies, with the result that they file through his bedroom in platoons. The gag wears thin.

Paul Whitsun-Jones, as the bumptious husband of Miss Harris, gives an enormously vigorous impersonation of this porky cuckold; and there are other suitable assists by Ernest Thesiger, Maureen Quinney, John Moffatt, Richard Easton, Peter Donat, Ludi Claire and Coleen Dewhurst.

But the play is still the thing, and this one suffers from the bends. Conceived in an era of lechery, when adultery was a recognized career, it looms drab today. So the wife of a plow jockey wants to get off with a city slicker. This is high humor?

Miss Harris can be pardoned for taking a hack at "The Country Wife," for it is a minor tradition in the theatre.

Others of note have preceded her, with varying degrees of acclaim, and I think she gave it a real bright try. But she's too good and too dear for this stale nonsense.

Come back to today, Julie! All is forgiven.